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UNCLAS ABUJA 001856

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: CENSUS DELAYED IS CENSUS DENIED

REF: (A) ABUJA 1744 (B) LAGOS 1433 AND PREVIOUS

1. (U) As expected, the National Population Commission (NPC) requested a postponement the national census, which had been planned for December, explaining at a September 22 presentation at the Presidential Villa that there were delays in preparations for the long-awaited head count. For example, shipments of census forms were not scheduled to arrive until December 2005 and January 2006. NPC Chairman Sumaila Makila also said that training of the approximately one million census workers would not be completed until March 2006. Given the logistical problems, President Obasanjo announced that the census would be held from March 21-25, 2006, the very end of the upcoming dry season. After that date, Makila added, no further delays would be possible because the rains would prevent field operations.

2. (U) The President went on to warn all the state Governors (most were present at the Villa) not to interfere with enumeration, to encourage people to participate, and to provide all possible logistical support to the census.

3. (SBU) Comment: The delay in conducting the census comes as no surprise, considering the controversy swirling around the head counting exercise (reftels). The next few months might be spent, in addition to working out the logistical problems, in persuading the Nigerian public why an accurate census is needed, in order to mitigate the constant boycott threats from multiple ethnic and religious groups. To date, no effective public relations campaign has been launched. The census, more than merely the first head count of Nigerians since the fifties, is a political issue, with regions, religious, and ethnicities all squaring off to defend their own interests. But the importance of the census is more than statistical: an accurate census could inhibit efforts to manipulate voter registration, and by extension manipulate the outcome of the 2007 elections. End Comment.

CAMPBELL